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MONTREAT CONFERENCE CENTER

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 10: 38-42

"Martha was distracted by her many tasks." Luke 10: 40 (NRSV)

We gather here this morning to acknowledge the mystery – that we are not alone: the mystery that you are, that you breathe life into us: the mystery that the whole creation is full of you, and that you come to us in the beauty of the earth, and in our encounters with others, our loved ones, our friends, the stranger. We are here to listen together for the word you have for us. So open our hearts and our minds: help us set aside every distraction and to focus, for these

moments, on the mystery revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I have been increasingly grateful over the years, although I was not at the time, to the college professor who included in his required reading a peculiar little book – entitled *Practicing the Presence of God.*

At the moment, a freshmen in college, I was not much interested in the topic. If God existed it was as a mystical entity beyond the universe, the ground of being, the all in all.

The author of this little book argues that God was in his kitchen. His name is Brother Lawrence, a lay brother in a

French monastery where he participated in the daily rhythm of prayer: seven periods during the day, a total of three hours of prayer every day. Brother Lawrence found it difficult. Furthermore, he didn't seem particularly close to God while he was praying with eyes shut in a liturgy in the chapel.

Bro. Lawrence said he could more authentically praise God, pray to God, practice the presence of God in the kitchen when he worked preparing the meals for the monastery. The monks, he wrote, were particularly fond of his pancakes.

It was working with his pots and pans that Bro. Lawrence prayed and

knew the presence of God, and the little book comprised of his notes and reflections, published after he died, is a classic in the literature of spirituality.

I thought about him this week reading a little story in the Bible about a woman who was working in her kitchen while Jesus was in the living room talking with her sister. It's a favorite and familiar story.

One day Jesus was welcomed by a woman named Martha into her home. Martha had a younger sister, Mary, and a brother, Lazarus, who shows up in another story later. It is Martha's home. When Jesus arrives, Martha leaps into action: prepares the house, shows Jesus the guest bedroom, puts cut flowers on the table by his bed, whisks through the

living room rearranging furniture as she goes, dusting, fussing, and then disappears into the kitchen, chops onions and carrots, peels potatoes, puts a roast in the oven, scours the cabinets for a suitable dessert. Meanwhile Mary, her younger sister, is sitting at Jesus' feet, hanging on every word, enthralled.

Traditionally, Mary's receptive devotion is taught as the point here, but I confess I've always liked Martha a lot better. I want to be a guest in her home. I had a mother-in-law like Martha who assumed that her mission in life was to keep me well fed. I just read last week that an adolescent boy will consume 2,000 calories at lunchtime if there is unlimited food. Bert knew that intuitively – and that it applied to young

fathers as well. When we visited, with young children, everything was ready, bedrooms prepared, a pot of sloppy joes simmering on the stove – my favorite – she opened her arms, literally took us in, particularly the children, and we took off, after eating a few sloppy joes, of course. I've always preferred Martha and have never been comfortable with her bad press; with the fact that over the centuries Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet listening, has been held up as a model of devotion, Christian piety, sitting quietly, listening.

New Testament scholars suggest that the way Luke tells this story reflects something that was happening in the early church. In the decades after the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus, women played prominent leadership roles in the early church. Their names are known, they're in Paul's letters, they are portrayed in ancient mosaics. But then in the second century, the church gradually became paternalistic, men assumed all the authority. When orders of clergy were devised, it was for men only. Contrary to earliest Christian tradition the church became what someone recently called the "oldest all boys club" in history, a condition that continues today in most of the Christian Church.

The early church loved Mary, passive, subservient, quiet; and used Martha as her foil, banging her pots and pans to express her resentment. Children's pictures of her portray her

peering around the kitchen door at her sister sitting at Jesus' feet scowling unpleasantly. (Elisabeth Moltmann – Wendell *The Women Around Jesus*, p.18)

Martha's resentment gets the best of her – and who could blame her? "Don't you care, Jesus, that I'm out here slaving away over a hot stove while she's sitting there, not doing a thing? Tell her to get up off her you-know-what and help me."

Jesus answers – so gently – "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her." He does not criticize her for her hospitality which, after all,

was a precious and core value of their people all the way back to Abraham. Jesus does not criticize her for working hard. She's distracted. That's the issue: not that her work is inferior, but at that moment, at least, her work, her obsessive busyness, has interfered with something uniquely important.

- **You can find God wherever you are and whatever you are doing.**
- **And sometimes your commitment to what you are doing can distract you from something important, maybe even God.**

Elisabeth Moltmann Wendell, in her book *The Women Around Jesus* observes

that this little vignette is only the first part of Martha's story. In the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, Martha appears in an incident involving her sister Mary again, and her brother Lazarus. Lazarus is critically ill. The sisters send word to Jesus. Before he arrives Lazarus dies. The house is full of mourners. Four days later Jesus finally arrives. Martha sees him coming, runs down the road and confronts him: "Where in the world have you been? What were you thinking? If you had arrived earlier, he might not have died." Right there on the road they have a conversation about death and resurrection. Martha says, "I believe he will rise again on resurrection day." And then comes the defining Christian word – Jesus says: "I am the

resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and every one who lives and believes in me will never die."

For 2,000 years Christian people, overcome by grief and at funerals and memorial services, have been comforted by that promise. Every day for 2,000 years, including a Memorial Service for a dear member of the community, someone has stood up and reminded the community that Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life."

"Do you believe that, Martha?" he asks. And standing there in the dusty road, in the middle of her impatient, impertinent, confrontation, Martha says, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the

Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Martha, pushy, assertive, demanding – gets to the very heart of the matter. When Mary finally arrives, once again, she throws herself at Jesus' feet weeping.

Moltmann says: "Martha is not a woman who keeps silence…she does not leave theology to the theologian. She does not throw herself at Jesus' feet as Mary did a few minutes later. She does not give in. She struggles with God as Job did. She charges Jesus with failure. She wrestles with God as Jacob did." (p.24)

Martha remaining in the kitchen while Jesus is in the living room suggests that doing everyday mundane

work, not just sitting in church – may very well may be the very place where you meet God…Kathleen Norris says that her times of deepest spiritual awareness are not only in prayer, but doing laundry, baking bread, walking.

She writes: "We want life to have meaning, we want fulfillment, healing and even ecstasy, but the human paradox is that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we wish we were." We must look for blessings to come from unlikely, everyday places." (The Quotidian Mysteries p.12)

For me, for what it is worth, it's both the prayers of the people during worship, and walking in the early

morning, or weeding, on my knees, hands in the dirt.

In *An Altar in the World* Barbara Brown Taylor also remembers Brother Lawrence, praising God while peeling potatoes and making pancakes. Taylor surprised her many readers by confessing that she is a failure at conventional prayer. "When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask her about her favorite dish. She learned in seminary, as we all learn that there are seven kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession and petition. She came, however, to prefer a new notion of prayer she heard from a friend, a Benediction monk. "The heart of

prayer," Bro. David said, is "Wake Up" – Prayer is waking up to God.

Barbara wrote: "When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me: when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive: when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer."

Bro. David told her once that "even biting into a tomato can be a kind of prayer."

You cannot watch the sun come up, cradle an infant in your arms, feel a catch in your breath as the CSO horn section announces the familiar theme of Beethoven's Fifth, you cannot ponder

the grace of a friend, the forgiveness of one you offended, the touch of a beloved's hand when you are alone – without being in prayer.

Martha, in the kitchen, as well as Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, was at a place where God is present and prayer happens. Ironically, it was Martha's work – her incessant activity, that distracted her. Her good and necessary and God-filled work was actually interfering.

Work can do that. Did you ever count how many times a day we tell one another how busy we are? It's the first thing we say…"How are you?" "I'm busy… I'm fine but I'm busy." It's a lament, but even more, I think, it's a statement of being, a kind of last ditch

existential affirmation of selfhood – "I'm busy."

I'm pondering retirement and I'm carefully watching and listening to brothers and sisters who are there. Guess what – they're busy. "How are you? How's it going?" "I'm busy – busier than I've ever been."

It's endemic among clergy. We live with the burden of knowing that some people think we have it pretty easy – only work on Sundays. When I had little children under foot, they would occasionally tell me that their friends wondered what I did all week. "What do you do, Dad?" I assured them that I was very busy. For clergy – being busy – can be, and often is, the last line of self

defense, in Reformed theological time, a last ditch effort to justify ourselves – to work our way to heaven.

We have a hard time not working. I'm on a Board with a good friend who distracts me by texting during the entire meeting. "Can you actually do that?" I asked. "Read and text, and pay attention to what's happening at the meeting. She assured me she can, but I'm skeptical. I try it – sometimes - read a few emails, check the Cubs score. Believe it or not I've been caught texting – as inconspicuously as I can – and it doesn't work – for me, at least. I stop paying full attention to what's going on. That's what Jesus caught Martha doing. Trying to do too much.

In a recent New York Times column, Thomas Friedman describes a taxi ride from Paris to De Gaulle airport. The driver and he did six things: the driver drove, talked on his cell, and watched a video. Friedman rode, worked on his laptop, listened to his iPod. "The only thing we didn't do was talk to each other." "The Disease of the Internet Age" Friedman says, is "continuous partial attention." We're so busy e-mailing, texting…we're not paying attention to what's happening, to the people around us.

- **You can find God wherever you are and whatever you are doing.**
- **But, sometimes your commitment to what you are**

doing can distract you from something more important.

So – Wake Up to God. Practice the Presence of God and pay attention to what is priceless and precious and often right in front of you. And don't ever allow your work to distract you from love – from the people you love and who love and need you – because their love is one of the ways God comes near and touches you and opens your heart and saves your soul.

It is frequently observed that no one on his or her deathbed has been heard to say: "I wish I had spent more evenings and weekends at the office."A timely article in the New York Times this morning, for Father's Day, observed

that men are catching up with women in the level of unhappiness created by stress and conflict between job and parenting.

A Boston College study of the "New Dads" who have assumed far more domestic responsibilities and parenting than their fathers, are encountering a work place that simply has not yet accommodated – and assumes that they will be unaffected by children.

I know that among my regrets are reading the newspaper when a little one wanted to talk or show me something, or missing a concert, play or basketball game because of a meeting I thought I simply had to attend. And it was a good

day for me – when I decided not to do that any more.

In a wonderful poem Wendell Berry addresses the saints in heaven – and how during their lives they longed to leave earthly life to be with God in eternity.

“But because of some unruliness, or some erring virtue never rightly schooled” – his life has not taught him the saints’ desire for flight…

Rather – it is here – in this life, in these relationships that he wants to find heaven.

He would like, in heaven, to know “his wife again, both of us young

again… I would like to know my children again, all my family, all my dear ones, to see, to hear, to hold, more carefully than before, to study them lingeringly as one studies old verses, committing them to heart forever. I would like again to know my friends, my old companions, men and women, horses and dogs… A painful Heaven this would be, for I would know by it how far I have fallen short. I have not paid enough attention, I have not been grateful enough…"

Brother Lawrence, Martha in the kitchen, you and I, doing what we do everyday, are in the presence of the holy, the sacred…

So, pay attention. Do not let anything distract you from the presence of God. Do not, of all things, miss love because you are working… Do not miss God…

Amen.